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ABSTRACT

A two week unit on the cycle of life in the African family for secondary school students is presented. General objectives are to help students value and respect marriage and the family as basic constituents of all human cultures: to create cultural awareness: to identify aspects of traditional family life which may serve as models for social change: and to eliminate stereotypic notions of African peoples. Five lessons examine initiation into adulthood, marriage in African societies, family structures, kinship systems, and the birth role of children. Each lesson provides learning objectives, lists resource materials, and suggests activities, procedures, and evaluation methods. Activities include discussion sessions, essay writing, and filmstrip viewing. All activities invite comparison with American customs, traditions, and social problems involving the family. (KC)

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"AFRICAN STUDIES CURRICULUM UNIT"

The Cycle of Life in the African Family

by

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This teaching unit on Africa was developed as part of an interdisciplinary workshop project in African curriculum development held on the University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign campus in the summer of 1978. The workshop project, which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, was carried out from 1977-80 and was integrated into an on-going program of outreach services offered to teachers nationwide. For further information on teaching aids available through outreach services, contact:

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SP 012 701

AFRICAN STUDIES UNIT

THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN THE AFRICAN FAMILY

Prepared by

Ruth Polk Patterson

SUBJECT AREA: Home Economics

COURSE TITLE: Adult Living

GRADE LEVEL: Senior High School

LENGTH OF TIME: Two Weeks

INTRODUCTION

Among African cultures, the family is the most vital institution. As in all societies it is the basic social structure within which the individual establishes identity, develops a sense of belonging, and learns the responsibilities to himself and his group. In return, the family provides the individual with security, protection, sustenance, and love. Marriage is the structure by which family is perpetuated. The main purpose of marriage is to have children, who, to many Africans, represent the only real wealth. Through marriage, children are born, kinship is established, and the group is strengthened and increased. Marriage, then, becomes a basic focus of the African ethos. Failure to get married often means that the individual has rejected the group, and the group in turn will reject the individual.

On the other hand, when two individuals marry, they give assurance that the primary life-force of the group is being acknowledged and sustained. The marriage ceremony itself has been described as a "drama of life" wherein all of the elements of time and place come together. In the traditional wedding rites, there is a celebration for the ancestors (the past), a celebration for the bride and groom (the present), and still another celebration for the children yet to be born of the union (the future).

In many important ways, African marriage and family life are much different from their American counterparts. However, the underlying principle that "the family constitutes the basic structure beneath all human society and is vital to human survival", is a principle which underpins traditional African cultures no less, or perhaps even more, than our own.

American family life is presently undergoing tremendous change. The institution of marriage is being challenged by the "new morality," which often disregards the fundamental principles inherent in the concept of "family." For example, there is a growing trend among many Americans to disconnect the reproduction of children with the stabilizing influence of a strong, encompassing family relationship,

a relationship that must by necessity include the interaction of parents, sibling, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others. Many children in our society are often being brought up without the love and protection and guidance of a large number of people such as we find in the traditional African family.

Looking at African customs and traditions, we may be able to discern some of the causes for the changes taking place in modern family life. At the same time, we may be able to gain insights into ways of refashioning and preserving the most important and vital of human organizations.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN THE AFRICAN FAMILY

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

1. To help students value and respect marriage and family as basic constituents of all human cultures.
2. To help students discover the differences and similarities between African and American family life.
3. To create awareness of and appreciation for cultures different from one's own.
4. To help students identify alternative ways of solving the problem of disintegrating family life.
5. To examine aspects of traditional African family life and extract those features which may serve as models for social change.
6. To eliminate stereotypic notions about the inferiority of African peoples and their cultures.

BASIC SKILLS:

The student will learn:

1. To respect and value cultural diversity.
2. To make acceptable analyses based on a given piece of information.
3. To make appropriate comparisons.
4. To solve problems that require critical thinking.
5. To draw inferences and make generalizations.
6. To read for the purpose of gaining the main idea from a selection.
7. To correlate facts known with new concepts to be learned.
8. To recognize stereotypes and slanted or biased interpretations.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN THE AFRICAN FAMILY

LESSCN I: Initiation into Adulthood

Initiation into adulthood is of key importance in the cycle of African family life. Most African societies observe the stage when youth pass from childhood to adulthood. At this time, the people hold special rites and ceremonies involving the entire community or village. These rites introduce the young to isolated communal living, which is symbolically associated, through ritual and mystery, to the process of dying and rebirth. Initiation rites also serve as a process of educating the young to assume the responsibilities of adult living.

In this lesson the student will learn:

1. To evaluate the purpose of initiation rites in traditional African cultures.
2. To compare and contrast the customs associated with the period of initiation in African cultures to those of a similar period in their own lives (e.g. Debutante Balls, Coming Out Parties, initiation into clubs, fraternities, etc.)
3. To analyze concrete examples of initiation rites to determine the value of specific activities and tasks, both symbolic and physical.
4. To recognize stereotypes about Africa.

Activities and Materials

Source Readings:

1. Mbiti, John S. African Religions and Philosophies, pp. 158-173.
2. Haley, Alex. Roots, pp. 1-43.
3. Laye, Camara. Dark Child, pp. 93-135.

Discussion Questions:

1. List six purposes that initiation rites serve.
2. What aspect of adult life do the initiates experience for the first time?
3. Compare and contrast the initiation rites of the Akamba, the Maasai, and the Ndebele. What purpose do they all share?
4. Describe the Nandi female initiation rites. What do male and female rites have in common? How do they differ?

5. To Americans, certain features of initiation rites may seem extremely harsh or even cruel. Do the purposes for which these practices are carried out justify their severity? Explain.

6. What features of the initiation rites seem the most likely to foster the common welfare of the group? Which seem to serve no useful purpose other than that of ceremony?

7. In our own society, what special training do young people receive to prepare them for adulthood and marriage, and when and how do they receive it?

Procedure

The teacher will first collect all of the available books from the Bibliography (Enclosure #1) and place them on reserve in the classroom. Reservations for audio-visual materials from the Instructional Materials Center should be made in advance. Next, the teacher should introduce the unit by discussing the main points from the "Introduction" above. The teacher should point out that African cultural traits differ from one country to another and even from one ethnic group to another within a country. Consequently, this is a composite of common features of family life found among a large number of African societies. However, when possible, specific examples from particular cultural groups will be presented.

The teacher should also help students become aware that certain terms have a pejorative connotation and should be avoided or handled with caution when discussing African peoples and cultures. Among such terms are the following:

tribe	primitive	hut
jungle	uncivilized	native
savage	heathen	pagan

The reading assignments from Mbiti, Laye, and Haley should be made at least three days in advance. Students should be encouraged to read and make notes, jotting down any words, terms, or ideas they do not understand or could not clarify by using the dictionary. The teacher should be able to help students arrive at new meanings through discussion of the questions above.

Using the enclosed diagram (Enclosure #2), the teacher will demonstrate that African family life moves in a cycle from any point on the circle, around, and back to that given point. For our purposes here, we begin with initiation, the point at which the students themselves are in their own lives.

Evaluation

The student should be able to write a brief essay on the value of initiation rites in African societies.

The student should be able to identify five specific, positive effects of initiation rites on the total welfare of the community.

LESSON II: Marriage in African Societies

It is difficult to discuss African cultures because of the diversity of life found among the various language and ethnic groups (often pejoratively called "tribes"). However, some common elements are evident in most societies. One of the commonalities is that marriage is essential to the well-being of the group. In most groups, the marriage of two individuals serves as link uniting two families. Traditionally, marriages are arranged by the families of the prospective bride and groom, and the groom is required to bestow "bridewealth" upon the family of the young woman. Finally, elaborate ceremonies are held, sometimes lasting for days, months, or even years.

In this lesson, students will learn:

1. To differentiate between the purpose for marriage in African and American societies.

2. To compare and contrast the methods of choosing a mate in African and American societies.

3. To identify problems faced by contemporary Africans in trying to adhere to the practice of "arranged" marriage.

4. To arrive at conclusions pertinent to the advantages and disadvantages of African marriage customs.

Activities and Materials

Source Readings:

1. Rich, Evelyn Jones, and Wallerstein. Africa-Tradition and Change, Section 4.

2. Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart, pp. 67-71 and 104-112.

3. Moore, Clark D. and Ann Dunbar. Africa Yesterday and Today. pp. 28-30.

4. Letters from "Tell Me, Josephine"

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the purpose for marriage in African societies?

2. Why do people get married in our own society?

3. To what extent are the reasons or reason for getting married logical, practical, and valid in African societies? In American societies?

4. Look up the word "dowry" in the dictionary. Compare the practice of bestowing a dowry with the practice of bestowing a bridewealth.

5. Traditionally, the parents of young men and young women make the final decision as to whether or not two individuals may marry. As a rule, Africans do not often express the same kind of romantic love that Americans profess. That is, it is rare that an African "falls in love" with one person to the exclusion of all others. On the contrary, the kind of love Africans most often express is familial love toward a large number of people. Consequently, the practice of parental choice of a mate formerly posed few serious problems. Today, many young people in Africa, especially those who have been exposed to Western cultures, demand greater freedom in selecting a marriage partner. Nevertheless, the wishes of their parents are still a serious matter. In addition, prevailing customs associated with marriage often preclude individual choice in selecting a mate. At the same time, the influence of Western cultures and urbanization have created conflicts which unmarried men and women must try to resolve. Read the letters from the column "Tell Me, Josephine" to gain insight into some of these problems.

6. Read letters No. 1, 2, and 3 and answer the following questions:

   a. What problem does the young man face in letter No. 1?

   b. How can you tell that the young man feels deeply for the girl?

   c. Do you think the advice from Josephine is sound? Explain.

   d. What are some of the marriage problems faced by two people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds in our society?

   e. In letter No. 2, why do you think the parents would rather have cattle than money?

   f. In letter No. 3, Josephine tells the writer to disregard "tribal" customs. This is directly opposite to what she told the writer in letter No. 1. How do you account for her change of view?

   g. Look in the "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abbey" column of your local paper and find letters that reveal the kinds of problems young unmarried Americans are trying to resolve.

7. Pretend that you are a member of an African family. If you are a young man, make a list of goods that your family might offer to another family as a "bridewealth." If a young woman, list the goods that you would like for your family to receive. Be sure that your "bridewealth" consists of goods in contemporary American life, and that they are goods which <u>your</u> family can afford or has access to. Among most ethnic groups today, however, bridewealth is paid in money.

   a. What purpose does the wedding ceremony serve other than simply uniting two people as man and wife?

   b. The marriage process in African societies involves a number of steps and procedures. Do we have this equivalents in the U.S.? Explain.

LESSON III: Family Structures

Now that students have dealt with familiar aspects of marriage (its purpose, choosing a mate, and the marriage rites), they may be introduced to more provocative and more complex topics.

In this lesson, the student will learn:

1. To differentiate between polygyny and monogamy.

2. To compare and contrast the extended family and the nuclear family.

3. To perceive the difference between matrilineal and patrilineal societies.

4. To recognize the importance of kinship systems, lineage, and ancestors.

5. To compare and contrast American family structures with African family structures.

6. To evaluate African family structures as effective bases for human survival in Africa.

7. To identify those features of African family structures which might tend to strengthen any cultural group.

Procedure

Select the key concepts from the objectives listed above and write them on the board. Point out that in American society we practice a form of marriage called "monogamy." Discuss with the students what the term means. Stress that in American society the term "family" refers to a husband, a wife, and any children they may have. This is what is termed a "nuclear family." In African societies, family means more than this. In addition to the nuclear family, an African family may consist of a husband, wife, co-wives, the children of all co-wives, uncles, aunts, grandparents, older relatives, and ancestors. This kind of family structure is referred to as an "extended family." Point out that one of the conditions that leads to an extended family is the practice of polygyny.

At this point the teacher might give students an opportunity to ask questions about the practice of polygyny. The teacher should have studied carefully from the chapters on African family structures in the references by Mbiti and Bohannan and Curtin listed in the Books for Teachers (Enclosure #1).

Materials and Activities

Source of Readings:

1. Aig-Imoukhede, Frank. "One Wife for One Man." in Nigeria-The Land, Its Art and Its People, edited by Frederick Lumley.

2. "Lopore and His Family." A case study from World Cultures by Clarence L. Ver Steeg.

3. Legend on the origin of matrilineal and patrilineal families in The Drum Speaks by Vera Mitchell.

Filmstrips:

A Village Family of Modern Africa. (Afro-Am Publishing Co.)

A City Family of Modern Africa. (Afro-Am Publishing Co.)

Films:

West Africa: Two Life Styles (African Studies Program, University of Illinois, 1208 West California, Urbana, Illinois 61801). May be borrowed free of charge. This film contrasts and compares urban and rural life in Ivory Coast.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Write a paraphrase of the poem, "One Wife for One Man."

2. According to the author of the poem, what are the advantages of having more than one wife?

3. Read the case study of "Lopore and his Family."

4. On a map of Africa locate the country of Uganda.

5. From the diagram on p. 117, locate the households of Lopore's four wives. This structure is often referred to as a "compound."

6. Identify the family members who live in the compound.

7. How does Lopore solve the problem stated by Bohannan and Curtin that "it is really the kitchen that they (women) refuse to share"?

8. Lopore experiences difficulties with his wife Ngira. Are these difficulties caused by his polygynous marriage or by Ngira's personality. Explain.

9. Answer questions 1, 2, and 4 at the end of the case study.

10. Ask each student to make a list of all the people who live in his or her household. Decide whether or not any of the students have what could be called an "extended" family. Some American families, especially Black families practice or have practiced a form of the extended family.

11. Divide the students into two groups. Let each group represent an extended family, with parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, children, co-wives, etc. Arrange a marriage between the two families, using an intermediary to make the initial contact and establishing the bridewealth.

Evaluation:

Students should be evaluated according to their participation in Activity 11 above, which should demonstrate their ability to become involved personally in another culture.

LESSON IV: Kinship Systems

An important phenomenon among many African societies is a strong kinship system. African societies are made up of persons who almost always identify themselves in terms of a group which acts to defend, rule, and direct the group collectively. The largest of these groups is the nation, but within the nation there may be smaller ethnic groups (e.g. Ashanti, Mandinka, Igbo, Yoruba), families, age sets, associations, secret societies, etc.

In this lesson, the student will learn:

1. To delineate the general structure of an African kinship system.

2. To evaluate the influences of the kinship system on the individual and on the group.

Activities and Materials:

1. Assign students to read from Mbiti, pp. 136-142.

2. Refer students to Enclosure #3 and have them view the diagrams from an opaque projector or construct large posters using poster board and different colored magic markers. Identify the terms according to the following information:

GOD: The Supreme Being - The All-Seeing One - The All-Wise One.

NATURAL GODS: Pantheons - including the god of the sky, of the rain, of the mountain, of the river, etc. Natural gods and the ancestors act as intermediaries between God, the All-Seeing, and human being. Natural gods may act for or against the group, according to their caprice.

ANCESTORS: One's ancestors are those persons who have past the stage of death and whose spirits remain with the group to see after the well-being of their relations. Not everyone who dies becomes an Ancestor: only those who led exemplary lives, made a valuable contribution to the group, and died in good standing in the community.

ELDERS: The oldest persons in the group; grandparents, great grandparents, uncles, etc.

PARENTS: The biological mothers and fathers of children.

UNCLES AND AUNTS: These are the individuals through whom descent is reckoned and inheritance passed on.

OLDER CHILDREN: Older brothers and sisters have responsibility for a degree of the care and protection of their younger brothers and sisters.

YOUNGER CHILDREN AND INFANTS: Children are always subordinate to those older than they.

Enrichment: Viewing and evaluating the film and filmstrips.

Evaluation:

Students will construct a model line drawing showing the line of authority in the American family. Select several which best depict the American family structure and place it on the board for evaluation and discussion.

Students will be able to list five ways in which a strong system of kinship serves to regulate and preserve the group.

LESSON V: The Birth Role of Children

The birth of a child is one of the most important events in the African family. A newborn baby represents the reincarnation of an ancestor, and the cycle of life completes or begins another round. To many Africans children represent the only real wealth, for they symbolize prosperity for the group. At the time of birth, there is usually a special ceremony to welcome the newcomer and give him or her an appropriate name. Because of the extended family, African children tend to love and be loved by a large number of people. Also, because protection and guidance are the responsibility of the entire group, the African child grows up with a deep sense of belonging and security. In addition, the discipline of children is collective. It is difficult for the child to break the established codes of behavior because he or she is surrounded by concerned and watchful older siblings and adults.

In this lesson, the student will learn:

1. Compare and contrast the role of children in African and American societies.
2. To illustrate ways in which children function in African life.
3. To value shared responsibility in the care and protection of children.
4. To recognize possible alternatives to present-day practices of child care in our own society.
5. To experience African naming practices.

Activities and Materials

Source Readings:

1. Acquaye, Alfred Allotey. Children of West Africa.
2. "Song of An African Mother to Her Firstborn." in Drachler, Jacob. African Heritage.
3. Brown, Roger K. and Felix N. Eburouh. "African Names: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria." African Studies, University of Illinois.

. Adjaye, Joseph K. "African Names: The Case of the Akan of Ghana." African Studies Program, University of Illinois.

Slides:

Children in East and West Africa. African Studies Program, University of Illinois.

A Day with Three Nigerian First Graders. African Studies Program, University of Illinois.

Begin the unit by reading the poem, "Song of An African Mother to Her Firstborn." Ask students to analyze the poem in terms of the following questions:

1. What is the feeling of the mother toward her child?

2. What features of the baby please the mother most?

3. Why is she only playing at naming her son?

4. Read the lines that reveal the reincarnation of the ancestor through the child.

5. What does the mother mean by the line, "Now indeed I am a wife"?

6. Read the lines that best reveal the mother's pleasure.

7. What does the poem say about immortality?

Next, using an opaque projector, view pictures of African children from Acquaye. Point out the ways in which African children are similar to American children.

View the slides on African children. Ask the students to bring pictures of babies in their own families for converting into slides.

Involve students in an African naming ceremony in which each student will choose an African name for the rest of the semester or school year. Use the names from one or both lists enclosed.

Evaluation:

The student will write a paper on the problems he or she perceives in American marriages, family life, and child rearing, and suggest ways in which African traditions might be adapted to solving those problems.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bohannan, Paul, and Philip D. Curtin. Africa and Africans. Garden City, N.Y.: The Natural History Press, 1971. Recommended reading for a simple introduction to traditional African societies and history.

Burke, Fred. Africa. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974. A simplified history of Africa from the early period of North, East, and West African nations. Could be used as a basic text for students.

Davidson, Basil. The African Past. New York: The Universal Library, 1967. An anthology of selected historical writings, this text chronicles the growth of African societies from the most remote antiquity to the present century. A valuable source combining the findings of anthropologists, archaeologists, and heretofore little noted African and European writers.

_____ The African Genius. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969. Recommended reading on basic African ethnography and colonial social history.

Hall, Barbara, ed. Tell Me, Josephine. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.

Mbiti, John S. African Religions and Philosophies. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1970. This text presents a comprehensive, scholarly study of African life, showing how religion is manifested in all aspects of African culture.

Moore, Clark D., and Ann Dunbar. Africa Yesterday and Today. New York: Bantam Books, 1968. Citing passages from well-known authorities, the editors attempt to draw together a composite of facts, thought, and opinion on African history and cultures.

Mojeckwu, Christopher C., et al., eds. African Society, Culture and Politics. Washington, D. C.: University of America, 1977. Included in this introduction for undergraduate students are selections on the development of African societies from the pre-industrial period to the present.

Skinner, Elliott P., ed. Peoples and Cultures of Africa. This collection of readings on Africa, compiled by the editor for the purpose of contributing a better understanding of the continent and the peoples, is designed for the student and layman interested in obtaining an overview of the traditional cultures of Africa.

Turnbull, Colin M. Man in Africa. New York: Doubleday, 1976. A description of African societies, with archaeological and historical background.

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publishing Company. This is a sourcebook of information on Ibo village life. At the same time, this popular novel is a classic commentary on the impact of Christianity and colonialism on traditional Nigerian culture.

Laye, Camara. The Dark Child. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1954.

Drachler, Jacob, ed. African Heritage. A collection of stories, poems, and essays, this anthology contains literature handed down in the oral tradition of folktales and songs, along with the best writings from modern African writers.

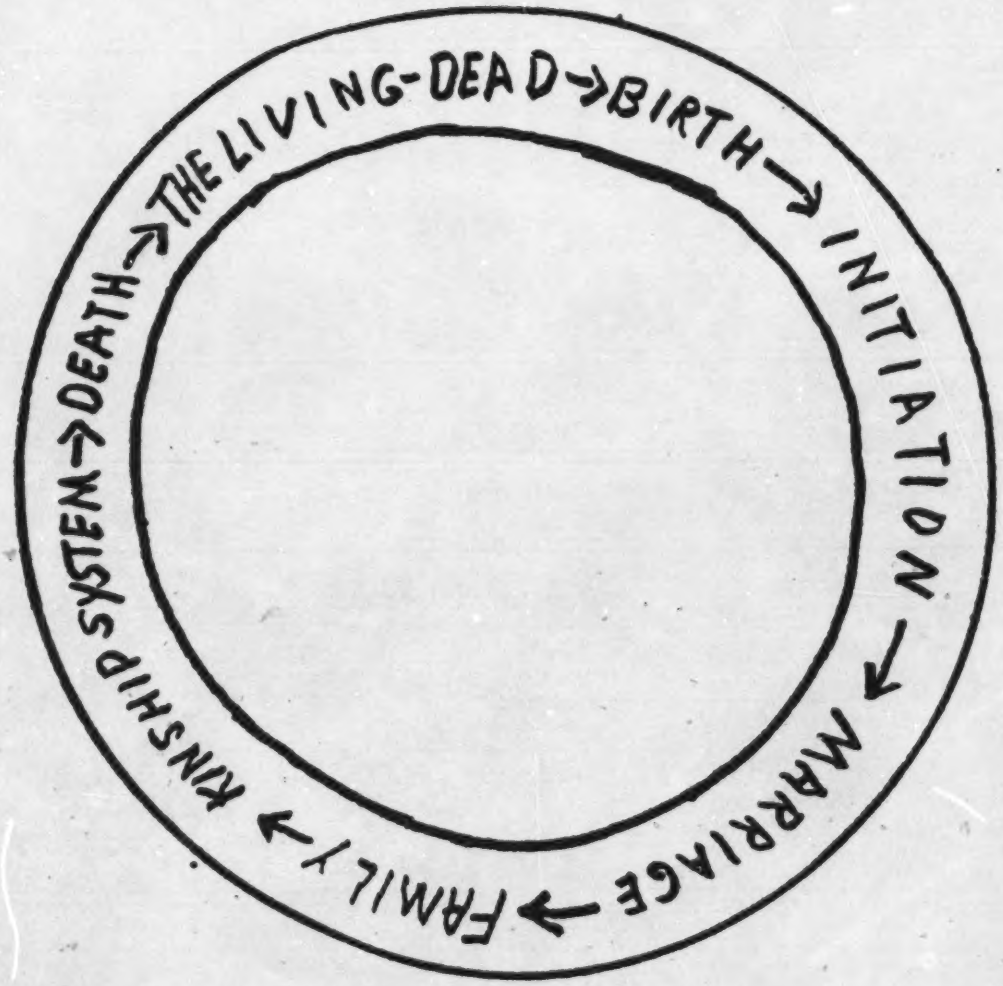
Miller, James E., and Robert O'Neal. Black African Voices. Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1970. This anthology provides a wide selection of folktales, poetry, short stories, essays, and biographies that have been chosen especially for classroom use.

Rich, Evelyn Jones, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Africa-Tradition and Change. New York: Random House. This is a comprehensive overview of contemporary Africa, including pre-history and historical background.

Enclosure #2

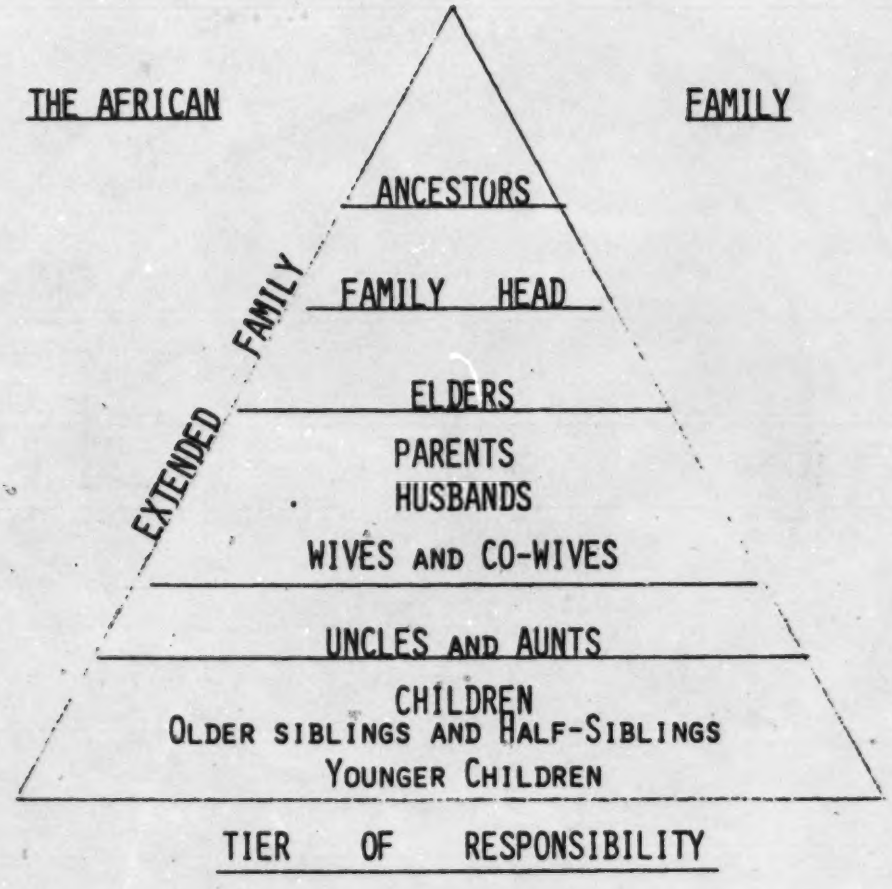
THE CYCLE OF LIFE

IN



THE AFRICAN FAMILY

Enclosure #3


THE AFRICAN FAMILY
ANCESTORS
FAMILY HEAD
FAMILY
EXTENDED
ELDERS
PARENTS
HUSBANDS
WIVES AND CO-WIVES
UNCLES AND AUNTS
CHILDREN
OLDER SIBLINGS AND HALF-SIBLINGS
YOUNGER CHILDREN
TIER OF RESPONSIBILITY